

Newsletter 22 Mackinder Geopolitics Then and Now

Hello Again Dear Reader,

*This issue of my free newsletter I would like to share with you something I wrote but have not published, in a sense exclusive content for readers of my letter. I deal with the extraordinarily successful in political terms and extraordinarily destructive in terms of wars and economic pillage, system of British Balance of Power and the later systematic development beginning 1904 of what has come to be called British geopolitics. That word is thrown about with little care for its original definition as developed by British Royal Geographer, Sir Halford Mackinder. To better understand how little the fundamental axioms of geopolitical power have changed from 1904, I share this fragment with you. For those of you who find this historical perspective interesting, even useful, I strongly recommend buying a copy of my best-known work, **A Century of War: Anglo-American Oil Politics**.*

A few Amazon Reader Reviews of [Century of War](#):

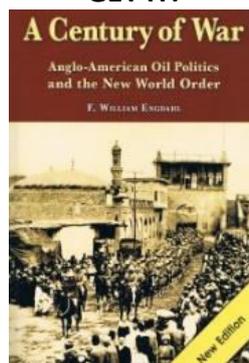
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A special sense of tradition

Like all British Prime Ministers within memory, Margaret Thatcher, although born as an ordinary grocer's daughter, a commoner in the very class-conscious British society, was educated at the elite schools and steeped in a very special sense of British "tradition." Thatcher's insistence on restoring a British version of balance of power after the collapse of communist control in Eastern Europe, and the unification of Germany was rooted in such tradition, shaped by centuries of British political practice.

English diplomacy had been remarkably successful in such manipulations, since the time of the alliance of England with the King of Portugal against Philip II's Spain in the 1580's.

England always sought a situation in which she could win over the weaker of two opponents, in order to get them to join with her against the stronger rival, in pursuit of what Lord Palmerston termed, British "interests." Preferably, this weaker new ally would also take the brunt of any actual fighting on behalf of England's interests. All, of course, in the name of the glorious alliance with brave England against the common foe.

Decades later the impressive term "balance of power" was given to this peculiarly British practice. This was the tradition of British foreign policy. Over the decades it became more subtle, or more devious, but always it came back to this fundamental principle.

The paradigm for the policy was first developed in relations with the Portuguese Empire. Portugal at the close of the 16th century was losing its global pre-eminence to the expansive Spanish Habsburg Empire. England at that point shrewdly firmed her alliance ties with the weaker Portugal, despite the Portugal's rivalry to England's naval ambitions. In so doing, England encouraged Portuguese soldiers to be slaughtered by the armies of Spain, while England demanded from Portugal ever more colonial concessions in return for the

protection of the English alliance. Portugal, under threat from Spain, had little choice but to accept England's harsh terms.

Taking advantage of England's remarkable 1588 defeat of the mighty Spanish Armada, using that feat to bring Portugal into ever more dependence on England's support, was the means whereby, piece by piece, England grabbed the "crown jewels" of the once-mighty Portuguese Empire.

By 1637 Portugal's power had been so weakened that the English East India Company could demand astonishing concessions from the Portuguese Viceroy for India. Since Vasco da Gama had taken Calcutta in 1498, India's coastline had been under Portuguese rule, a vital control point for the entire spice trade with the Far East. But without the financial resources to maintain and defend a mighty sea fleet, Portugal could no longer control the rich trade from India and the Far East.

England's East India Company, a Royal Crown monopoly granted to private interests by the English Monarchy, took advantage of their ally's weakened position, following a series of successful naval engagements in the Indian Ocean against the Portuguese fleet. The British East India Company demanded that all Portuguese trade from India be carried exclusively on ships of their East India Company, and that the Portuguese turn over to the English company their invaluable navigation maps, as well as to provide the English all secret trade intelligence Portuguese agents received.

Adding insult to injury, in 1703 England's Queen Anne and her shrewd Ambassador to Lisbon, Paul Methuen, persuaded the King of Portugal to sign an English-Portuguese commercial treaty. With promises of lucrative export under preferential tariff for Portuguese wines into England, Portugal, which had built up one of the most advanced cloth manufacturing industries in Europe, agreed to allow import of English textiles at a preferential tariff, in return for access to England's wine market. But wine was a product which England in any case had to import, usually from France and Germany. To substitute Portuguese wine for French, was of little consequence to England's economy. But textile manufacture was of great consequence to Portugal's.

Within months of the signing of the Treaty, Portugal found herself deluged with English manufactures, leading to the ruin of the once-flourishing Portuguese manufactures. The English tradesmen, as well, managed to cheat on the customs declared value, allowing them to pay duty on only half the real value of their goods.

Within a matter of months, English merchants were carrying off the vast silver and gold bullion of Portugal, as payment for their goods. The *British Merchant*, a trade magazine of the day, reported, "After the repeal of the prohibition, we managed to carry away so much of their silver currency that there remained but very little for their necessary occasions; thereupon, we attacked their gold."

Through their calculated "friendship" agreement, English merchants bankrupted the Portuguese state in a matter of a few years, sending the silver and gold from their successful business to finance purchases by English tradesmen in the East Indies and China, thus financing the building of England's own Empire with Portuguese gold.

It was the beginning of the end of Portugal as a world power, a nation which had only decades before been a pre-eminent scientific and leading colonial nation, in the world. Portugal was to plunge into backwardness, poverty and insignificance for centuries to follow, as a direct consequence of her English alliance.

The history of the English East India Company was a paradigm for British exertion of power. Since its founding at the end of the 16th Century, the East India Company, during its some 200 years' history, had grown to control fully half of the entirety of world trade. The Company had the power to raise armies, take colonies, destroy nations, and, in reality, became the vehicle by which the British created their Empire, with a nominally a private company, hence largely unaccountable.

Subsequently, under Portugal's Braganza monarchy, England increased her advantage over Portugal's Empire, demanding the marriage of Catherine of Braganza with England's King Charles II. In return for this generosity of Charles, Portugal was forced to offer as marriage dowry two million gold pieces plus Tangier on the Morocco side of the Gibraltar Strait and Bombay on the Arabian Sea. Through such measures, tiny England, an island nation, step-by-step grew to become the dominant world naval power by the 19th Century.

England's alliances shifted, as her interests changed over the course of time. The alliance with Portugal as succeeded with later alliances with Holland, with Turkey against Czarist Russia, with France and Russia against Germany on the eve of the 1914 Great War, down to Margaret Thatcher's decision to abruptly

seek an alliance with the Soviet Union and Mitterrand's France, against a unified Germany after 1990.

But the same essential British alliance strategy in pursuit of British balance of power had always been the invariant in British foreign policy. It was the tradition in which Lady Thatcher was schooled at Cambridge University, and the same tradition which Winston Churchill had embodied since his early years at the turn of the century, aiding the British Imperial cause to gain control of the vast gold reserves of the Transvaal in the Boer War. British Balance of Power had never been the elegant, harmonious concept its name was intended to imply, but it did have tradition.¹ (1).

A Churchillian Geopolitics

Not surprising it was, that, when Margaret Thatcher established her own office as Prime Minister in 10 Downing Street in May 1979, one of the first things she did to put her own imprint in her new surroundings, and to emphasize her own special sense of honoring tradition. She chose to hang a wartime picture of her personal ideal, Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

In May 1940, the month Churchill had been made Prime Minister in a War Cabinet, with the mandate to prepare Britain for a war against Germany, Margaret Hilda Thatcher was a young girl of fourteen, studying at Grantham Girls' School. But, as Prime Minister, a half century later, she adopted a version of British balance of power politics as no Prime Minister in this past century practiced more ruthlessly, with the exception of her admired Churchill.

The role of Churchill in British politics since the Boer War, has been debated more than that of most any political figure of the past century. Curiously, most of the discussion had been either written by Churchill himself, or falsified in various ways to hide what was the most devastating political secret of our time, that of the role of the British elite, including Churchill, in the tragic events of the Second World War.

Churchill's unflinching commitment to what had become known as British "geopolitics," and the worldview of its theorist, Halford Mackinder, was rarely, if ever, noted, despite the fact that Churchill's own political career from his days in South Africa in the Boer War, had been shaped thoroughly by Mackinder and Mackinder's close friends in the Cecil Rhodes/Lord Milner Round Table circle.

It was Halford Mackinder's specific formulation of British geopolitics which shaped England's entire strategic policy since the time of the 1938 Chamberlain Munich meeting, through to and beyond Churchill's famous 1946 Fulton, Missouri "Iron Curtain" speech, a speech which helped create the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union, a Cold War that lasted until November 1989 and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact system.

Unravelling the secret of Mackinder's Round Table group, Churchill, and British geopolitics, holds the key to the otherwise inexplicable reaction of the Thatcher's British government after November 1989, to the changes occurring in Europe's political map. To understand how, it is necessary to go back to the turn of the century.

Geographical Pivot of British History

On January 25, 1904 a young Oxford professor of geography read a paper before the Royal Geographical Society in London, a paper which was to change the course of this last century. The paper, titled, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, was presented by Halford John Mackinder as the basis of his theory of a "new economic and political geography." ²

Mackinder was the central strategist of the highly influential and highly secretive Round Table faction in British policy, a group which included Lord Lothian, Cecil Rhodes, Lionel Curtis, Lord Halifax, Lord Rothschild, William T. Stead, Viscount Escher, Lord Milner, Jan Smuts, Viscount Astor among others, and whose influence shaped British strategic thinking from Churchill's policies at the beginning of the century, down to Margaret Thatcher's and key sections of the British Foreign Office of the present day.

Mackinder argued that the coming of railroads to the "Heartland", i.e. Russia and Eurasia, would fundamentally alter the balance of power between the Eurasian landmass and the greatest sea-power, Britain. Further, the rail revolution would shift that balance to the favor of the land-power of the great Continental states, namely, Germany and the states of Central Europe. Mackinder went on to argue that whoever dominated the Heartland would be in a position to make a bid for world power.

Mackinder declared three postulates in another 1919 work:

"Who rules East Europe (by which he included Germany, Austria-Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia or what could be called Mitteleuropa), commands the Heartland (Russia, Ukraine and adjacent regions);

Who rules the Heartland, commands the World-Island (i.e. the entire Eurasian landmass from Calais to Vladivostock);

Who rules the World-Island, commands the World." ³

Halford Mackinder wrote this formulation in 1919 to serve as a policy guide to the British negotiators at the Versailles Peace Conference, a conference which drew the map of the postwar world, including the carthaginian terms imposed on defeated Germany.

Mackinder offered the British imperial establishment a seemingly scientific rationale for its previously pragmatic political policy, within which British "balance of power" could even be publicly justified as an enlightened outlook for the overall good of mankind.

The influence of Mackinder and his Round Table circle, drawn from a select elite from Cambridge and Oxford, was to become pervasive over the following decades of the century, from Mackinder's first presentation of his thesis in 1904.

Already in a debate in 1904, Mackinder had presciently argued that the conflict between sea-powers and land-powers would, "be supplemented by the air as a means of locomotion, under which a great deal of this geographical distribution must lose its importance; and the successful powers will be those that have the greatest industrial base. It will not matter," he concluded, "whether they are in the center of a continent or on an island; those people who have the industrial power and the power of invention and of science will be able to defeat all others."

Political intrigue and diplomatic manipulation of allies was intended to compensate for the successive erosion of a strong British industrial and scientific base over the course of this past century.

The British Imperative

The corollary to Mackinder's thesis on the Russian Heartland versus the Island Power England was that Britain, as the dominant maritime power of the world, must do all possible to create a cordon sanitaire, in order to prevent German

and Russian powers from ever unifying strategically, politically and economically. This was essential he argued, in order to ensure the perpetuation of British naval dominance of the world order.

Mackinder's Round Table circle was founded in 1910, on an explicitly anti-German, pro-British Empire standpoint. In their journal, *Round Table*, Lord Lothian (Philip Kerr) wrote in 1911, three years before World War I, "There are at present two codes of international morality--the British or Anglo-Saxon, and the Continental or German. Both cannot prevail. If the British Empire is not strong enough to be a real influence for fair dealing between nations, the reactionary standards of the German bureaucracy will triumph, and then it will be only a matter of time before the British Empire is victimized by an international 'hold-up' on the lines of the Agadir incident. Unless the British people are strong enough to make it impossible for the backward rivals to attack them with any prospect of success, they will have to accept the political standards of the aggressive military powers."⁴

In his theoretical construct, which Mackinder had named "geopolitics," he argued that physical and political geography were one and the same. A nation or peoples' geographical area, whether ocean-encircled as Britain, or surrounded by a vast flat land-mass as Russia, determined the broad contours of that nation's history. Britain was a sea-power, whose global influence depended on her maintaining that dominance, whereas, for Mackinder, Russia was a vast insular power whose territorial ambition was limited only by the extent of her armies and resources to extend her borders.

As Mackinder himself described his system of geopolitics, its aim was "not to predict a great future for this or that country, but to make a geographical formula into which you could fit any political balance."⁵

Mackinder had claimed to have developed the rigorous rationale for future British foreign policy. This dangerous illusion was to become imbedded in the succeeding decades of British foreign policy action, down to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

In his seminal 1904 essay, Mackinder further stated, "From the present time forth, in the post-Columbian age, we shall again have to deal with a closed political system, and none the less that it will be one of world-wide scope. Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and weak elements in the political and economic

organism of the world will be shattered in consequence." In short, Mackinder saw in 1904 that the entire globe had become inter-connected, largely through the global demands of the British Empire.

The Oxford professor Mackinder in his 1904 statement went on to say, "In the present decade we are for the first time in a position to attempt, with some degree of completeness, a correlation between the larger geographical and the larger historical generalizations ...a formula which shall express certain aspects of geographical causation in universal history." He went on to make his point more directly, "Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls. My concern is with the general physical control, rather than the causes of universal history."

To illustrate his thesis, Mackinder argued an exotic interpretation of European history: "A repellent personality performs a valuable social function in uniting his enemies, and it was under the pressure of external barbarism that Europe achieved her civilization...Look upon Europe and European history as subordinate to Asia and Asiatic history, for European civilization is, in a very real sense, the outcome of the secular struggle against Asiatic invasion."

Mackinder further stressed, "The most remarkable contrast in the political map of modern Europe is that presented by the vast area of Russia occupying half the Continent, and the group of smaller territories tenanted by the Western Powers." He continued, "For a thousand years a series of horse-riding peoples emerged from Asia through the broad interval between the Ural mountains and the Caspian sea, rode through the open spaces of southern Russia, and struck home into Hungary in the very heart of the European peninsula, shaping by the necessity of opposing them, the history of each of the great peoples around--the Russians, the Germans, the French, the Italians, and the Byzantine Greeks...The mobility of their power was conditioned by the steppes, and necessarily ceased in the surrounding forests and mountains."

Winston Churchill well understood Mackinder's principle of using a "repellent personality" to perform a valuable social function, and used it to a degree unimaginable. Mackinder's doctrine was to shape the outlines of the last and the present century as no other, not even Bolshevism, nor fascism, would. The essential point was that it became the unspoken political ideology of the world's leading power at the turn of the century, and, after 1945 of the American leading foreign policy makers including John J. McCloy to John Foster Dulles to Henry Kissinger and the late-Zbigniew Brzezinski. The increasingly desperate rise of the so-called neo-conservatives reflects the twilight of that

American Century and an increasingly desperate attempt to hold on to that global superpower supremacy by ignoring the essential postulates of Mackinder geopolitics in favor of raw, brute force and war.

endnotes:

¹ For a useful historical account of the early days of England's Balance of Power diplomacy, and especially how she used her alliance with Portugal to build her Empire on the latter's weakness, refer to the account of Zischka, Anton, "Englands Bündnisse: Sechs Jahrhunderte britischer Kriege mit fremden Waffen," Leipzig, Wm. Goldmann Verlag, 1940. On the detailed early history of the little-understood English East India Company and its role in furthering the global expansion of the British Empire, see Keay, John, "The Honourable Company," Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1991. The mechanisms of the 1703 Methuen Treaty with Portugal are well described in List, Friedrich, "The National System of Political Economy," Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, Fairfield, N.J. 1977.

² Mackinder, Halford, "The Geographical Pivot of History," London, The Royal Geographical Society, 1904.

³ Mackinder, Halford, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, London, Constable & Co., 1919.

⁴ The role of Mackinder's secretive Round Table Group, is of enormous significance to the history of this century, all the more so that its activities have been sufficiently disguised. For a useful account of its formation, influence and strategic views see Quigley, Carrol, "The Anglo-American Establishment from Rhodes to Clivden," New York, Books in Focus, 1981.

⁵ Mackinder, Halford, *op. cit.*